We demand compromise: which achieves more, asking for small or large changes?

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Abstract

Welfare is the state of an animal on a continuum, from poor to good, so many decisions about it are decisions of degree, such as how much feed, space or environmental enrichment should be provided. Other decisions are more discrete, such as whether animals should be kept in cages. However, in practice, many such decisions also involve a range of possibilities — such as whether laying hens should be kept in conventional cages, furnished cages, other housed systems or free range — so that decisions within the range are also of degree. Furthermore, in broader contexts, such as husbandry standards for farm animals, decisions are needed as to how many criteria are to be addressed, which are also decisions of degree. Similarly, decisions about which species to protect and from how early in individual development they need protection are to some extent categorical. This is sometimes referred to as 'line drawing.' However, this mainly refers to whether or not animals are sentient, and sentience is not clearly distinguished from other aspects of animals’ cognition and responses, so there is no conclusive boundary between 'haves' and 'have nots.' So, these decisions are also of degree: is there sufficient evidence to 'move the line' further? When there are pressures against change, such as financial cost, should welfare advocates ask for small or large changes? The answer to this question will depend upon circumstances. But discussion of different circumstances suggests that compromise, realism, gradualism and pragmatism are all important in achieving improvements in animal welfare, while noting that other tactics also contribute in particular contexts.

Keywords: animal welfare, compromise, diplomacy, policy, sentience, strategy

Introduction

How applied is applied science? All of us involved in science relevant to animal welfare are also — to a greater or lesser extent, and willingly or unwillingly — involved in the use of that science to evaluate, to safeguard and/or to advance the welfare of animals with which humans interact. As one illustration of the increasing recognition of that, when we revised the book Animal Welfare (Appleby & Hughes 1997) to produce the second edition (Appleby et al 2011), we found it appropriate to add a chapter on ‘Practical strategies to assess (and improve) welfare’ (Butterworth et al 2011, see also Butterworth et al 2018).

This raises the complicated question of how such application can be achieved: how the behaviour of humans who interact with animals can be influenced to benefit animals. It also raises the two-sided nature of that question: first, what human behaviours are needed to safeguard or improve animal welfare (for example, providing appropriate environments and treatment)? In other words, what resources or inputs are desirable? And, second, what is actually the aim, regarding animal welfare? In other words, what welfare outcomes are desirable? The balance to be struck between inputs and outcomes is well discussed by Butterworth et al (2011, 2018). However, as this article is mainly about influencing the behaviour of people who impact animals, the emphasis here will be on inputs, on what they do that affects animal welfare.

The issue of influencing human behaviour was recently addressed by Appleby and Mitchell (2018; p 2):

Understanding human behaviour is complex and involves many disciplines in addition to ethology, including sociology, economics, politics and diplomacy. But it is helpful to consider the people and groups of people who impact animals as a hierarchy, from numerous individuals with direct impact up to smaller numbers of institutions — such as governments and intergovernmental organisations — whose impact may be large but indirect (Figure 1). And our experience as scientists active in animal advocacy convinces us that to improve animal welfare it is important to engage both low down in this hierarchy — to produce case studies and other evidence that will be persuasive to decision-makers — and high up — to lobby for policies that will influence and affect large numbers of people and animals. We therefore refer to this hierarchy as the ‘pyramid of influence.’

It is also important to recognise, though, that scientists do not generally have a special or privileged voice in